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A PROJECT IN COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE KINDERGARTEN

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A project of great interest to the children of the kindergarten of the University Elementary School was one developed during the winter which they called "Our City." During the autumn quarter the children had engaged in housekeeping plays and had built and equipped a grocery and a toy store. As a result they had acquired a background of interesting experiences connected with home and community life.

The project suggested by children.—One morning early in January, the teacher had all of the building blocks within easy access and said to the children, "What would you like to build with the blocks today?" One child answered immediately, "Let's build a town." Although the teacher had intended at some time to lead the children to such a project, she had not expected to introduce it so soon. As the psychological moment seemed to have arrived, however, the children were encouraged to begin at once.

Preliminary discussion and free experimentation.—There was first a discussion as to what buildings a town should include, and a list of those suggested was written upon the blackboard. This list was later printed upon a chart. The following buildings were mentioned the first day: (1) station, (2) state bank, (3) "Congress Hotel," (4) church, (5) grocery store, (6) toy-store, (7) houses, and (8) garage. Each child began to work upon the building of his choice, selecting his own place in the room for its construction. He also chose the blocks he thought were best suited to the requirements of his particular building.

Organization follows free experimentation.—The next day the children were eager to work upon their buildings. One little girl said, "I am going to build my church across the street from Barbara's house." Another child said, "I am going to move my garage

over next to Stephen's store." This spontaneous grouping of buildings suggested the idea of streets to the children, and after a discussion of the different kinds of buildings being erected, they decided to have a "business" and a "residence" street. Two adjacent sides of the room were set apart for these streets, and a platform 3 feet wide by 20 feet long on one side, and 3 feet wide by 15 feet long on the other side, was erected on blocks 6 inches in height. This platform was made of boards obtained from the school shop. The platform was to serve as a permanent place for the buildings and was raised from the floor so that the children could work more easily. The best buildings were to be placed upon it as the permanent buildings in the "city." As one platform represented a residence and the other a business street, the children decided where each building should stand and the teacher wrote the name of the building on the spot chosen for it.

Group and individual criticism.—Before a building could be placed upon the permanent street, it had to represent the very best ability of the child who built it. This necessitated constant criticism of his work by the child himself, aided by group discussion and comment. One day a child from another group came into the room and, looking at the buildings scattered about on the floor, remarked, "These are pretty funny-looking houses. I don't see a single chimney." Needless to say, after that remark the chimney was always a feature of every building.

The choice of the buildings to be placed upon the street was put into the hands of a committee appointed by the group. This committee was interesting because of the characteristics the children thought it should possess. It was to consist of one child from each of the five different groups, and he must be a child who could "build well himself." One teacher, as well, was to be on this committee.

Competition caused improvement and new suggestions.—There was a constant effort upon the part of the children to improve their work. At no time did a child seem disappointed or discouraged because his building was not chosen, but he usually thought immediately of some other building which the city should have and at once began its construction. Every day brought new suggestions; for example, to the original list was added a theater,

drug-store, fire department, school, bakery, and a small waiting-station or "warming-house," as the children called the small building on the platform of the Illinois Central suburban station in the neighborhood.

Equipment of buildings the next step.—When the structures were completed, the children immediately began to equip them. This was not left to the child who made the building. Often a whole group would be interested in working upon one building, and just as often every child in a group might be making a bit of equipment for a different building. Each child worked where his interest dictated.

The equipment of the buildings led to the use of all kinds of materials and many forms of manual arts. The buildings had been left roofless, to allow greater ease in working in them.

Each building bore its own sign, suggested by the group and printed upon oak tag board. This was then tacked to the building. Some of these signs were "Forbe's Drug-Store," "Marr's Garage," "Congress Hotel," "Elementary School," "St. Paul's Church," and "Fire Department No. 1."

Different buildings described.—The "elementary school" was worked out in great detail. The building was 28 by 40 inches and was placed upon the "residence street" because it is so situated in reality. It consisted of two rooms, the kindergarten and the first-grade rooms, and a corridor. These rooms were furnished as nearly as possible like the corresponding rooms in the University Elementary School. The kindergarten room showed windows at which yellow (paper) curtains were hung, window boxes (green construction paper) with blooming plants (drawn, cut out, and pasted in box), a clock (drawn and pasted upon the wall), blackboards (black paper), pictures upon the walls (drawn by children), the "visitors' bench," piano, desk and seats (constructed from smaller blocks), and paper dolls in the seats. The children took great pleasure in working out minute details. For example, the pictures on the walls of the miniature kindergarten room were exact copies of "Jack Be Nimble," "Little Miss Muffet," and "The Three Bears," which are in their room.

The "theater" was another interesting building. It was 24 by 36 inches, and was equipped with a stage and seats arranged with an aisle between them. At the rear, a box office was built in, and a man, modeled of clay and painted, gave a realistic touch to the whole. A sign or billboard was made of wood and placed outside. Another child drew pictures of the three bears and printed, "Three Bears—Today, 9 cents." This he tacked to the billboard, and the little playhouse was ready for the tiny china and paper dolls which soon occupied the seats.

The "home bakery" was a structure 24 by 24 inches. Over its large show window a manila paper awning with brilliant stripes found a place. The show window contained most realistic cakes, rolls, doughnuts, and pies, as did the cases within. A mixture of salt and cornstarch was used for making these articles. This was especially suitable because it was white and, with the aid of water colors, could be made the desired shade for brown rolls and doughnuts, and pink and yellow sugar on the white cakes. There were counters, trays (paper), bags (paper), baskets (paper), and, most important, the cash register constructed of blocks.

Opportunity provided for originality.—In the grocery and toy-stores, the children showed the greatest originality in constructing the wares with which the shelves were filled. Tiny sets of clay dishes on trays, painted and shellacked, sleds, wagons, dolls, marbles, fruits, vegetables, baskets, and even tiny telephones were modeled of clay and painted appropriate colors. There seemed to be no limit to the possibilities which were offered for interesting and valuable work in manual arts.

Further suggestions offered by children.—When it was found that the space prohibited further buildings, interest was focused upon the street itself, and sidewalks, steps, street lights, mail boxes, safety signs, street cars, vehicles, and inhabitants made their appearance one by one. These additions always came as suggestions from the children who were encouraged to experiment freely. If the suggestions seemed valuable, they were taken up and emphasized and an effort made by the teacher to clarify the ideas of the children. When the children decided to build a "residence" and

a "business" street, they were taken out to see these. The church (St. Paul's on the Midway), the fire department, and the bakery, all necessitated excursions which led to new and clearer ideas and an increased interest in the project. The making and placing of street lights and street signs became most interesting to the children after they had been out to examine them.

Information gained by children.—Although the children engaged in this project are less than six years of age, they have had an introduction to civics. They have become acquainted with the means by which a city provides for the convenience and safety of its people. Lights, sidewalks, good roads, traffic policemen, the fire department, the many signs, and different-colored lights at crossings have come to mean something very definite in the experience of the children who worked upon "Our City." They have learned that people choose and establish their own homes, that groups of individuals band together and form a church, that larger groups form cities, which in turn require and control schools, fire departments, policemen, etc.

The idea of the "state" came to the children through the desire of one child to call her building the "State Bank." When asked why she wished to call it that she said, "Because that is our bank on Fifty-fifth Street." The teacher then said, "Does any child know what 'state bank' means?" Another child answered, "A bank that the state takes care of." "What is a state?" This question was followed by the answer that "a state has lots of towns in it."

When at the beginning of their building many of the children made houses without doors and windows, the children noticed this defect, and the teacher followed it up with the query, "Why is it necessary to have windows in houses?" "Light and air" came as an immediate response, and was followed with a discussion of the necessity of plenty of air, sleeping with open windows, etc.

All this information came to the children incidentally and in a most informal manner. It was the constant aim of the teacher not to give information, but to clarify the ideas of the children when the opportunity arose. They usually had a more or less hazy

conception of the idea, and it was only necessary to ask a question or two to make its meaning clear to them.

Observation developed.—The development of this project has led to keener observation on the part of the children. They added details, as the work progressed, that they had entirely ignored in the beginning. This was shown in making "safety" signs near their school building. At first they were satisfied with a simple circular cardboard disk for a sign, but later they inquired what the letters said, why there was a red circle in the middle of these signs, and why they were not as tall as the street lights by which they stood. They showed an interest in other signs. When out walking, they wished to stop and "read" the signs on the lawns and in front of certain buildings which bear the legend "No Parking Here."

Different types of subject-matter related to the project.—This project was the center of interest to the entire class, and every child contributed to it in some way. Many of the activities of the kindergarten naturally grouped themselves around it. The conversation period offered an opportunity for the exchange and clarification of ideas. Much information, while given incidentally, will be of permanent value. Through the discussion of various phases of work connected with the project, experiences of many types were recalled by the children, and they were encouraged to relate these. At the time the mail boxes, postmen, and the post-office were taken up, several children told of visits to Washington and the Capitol. When the word "state" was brought in, the children recalled and related experiences in different states: Florida and California in winter; Wisconsin, Michigan, and Colorado for summer vacations.

Pictures were used to aid the children in oral expression and a clearer understanding of the subject-matter. Some of the pictures used were those of residence and business streets, different buildings—churches, houses, stores, hotels, and depots—pictures showing traffic—trains, automobiles, and wagons—and pictures of people—postmen, firemen, and policemen.

Many opportunities were offered for group composition. Owing to the nature of the material, the excursion was made use of in many instances. These excursions were usually followed by periods

in which the children drew pictures of what they had seen and composed stories. A trip to the fire department proved so interesting that a composite book was made describing it. All of the children drew pictures of something seen on this excursion, and the group "voted" upon the best drawings. These were mounted, stories composed and typewritten, and the whole bound together into a book which the children called "The Fire Department Story." This book is kept in the kindergarten where it is constantly read and enjoyed.

THE FIRE DEPARTMENT STORY

We went to the Fire Department. The men showed us the engine and the things on it. We went upstairs and saw the beds, and we saw the men come down the poles. They showed us where they hung the hose to dry after the fire.

We went outdoors, and they showed us how they get up to the second story of a building. We saw the net. Robert Williams climbed up on a truck and jumped into it. Miss Harris gave us each a cracker and one to each of the firemen too. We said thank you and good-bye to the firemen and came back to the kindergarten.

The following sentences were given by the children to go with the illustrations in their book:

1. This is the fire truck.
2. These are the children, and the net.
3. This is Robert Williams in the net.
4. This is the fire department.
5. These are the beds upstairs.
6. Downstairs in the fire department.
7. This is the man coming down the pole.

In furnishing the different buildings, many forms of manual arts were employed. Paper and empty boxes of all kinds were used in making vehicles and furnishings for the different stores. Plastic materials were used to a great extent. Some of the "people" in the community were made of clay and appropriately painted. A traffic officer in blue uniform stood at the street corner with arms extended in a most realistic manner.

Drawing and design were required in making awnings for the different stores, napkins, tablecloths, and rugs for the houses, and illustrations for the books.

Incentives to reading.—There were numerous opportunities for surrounding the children with incentives for reading. When the buildings were suggested, lists of these were written on the black-board, and the next day they were printed on large cards or charts. When the space on the street was chosen for a particular building, its name was written on that space. Signs were printed for all the buildings, likewise for the streets. Each street car and vehicle bore its own name, while even the books in the toy store, school, and church bore titles suggested by the children.

Dramatic play.—The children have a free play period each morning. During these periods many interesting details were added to the project. A wagon was made for use in hauling the building blocks which were kept in an adjoining corridor. The "Three Bears" were modeled in plasticine and placed in the theater. A billboard and a sign were started at this time, as well as furnishings for many of the buildings. Any worthy or valuable idea introduced in this period was emphasized at the conversation period, when the children often showed and described what they had made during this free period. It was at this time that the children really played with the project. They took great pleasure in walking on the sidewalk after it had been laid. One of the morning duties was to sweep the street with the little kindergarten broom. The numerous paper doll ladies rode to the bakery and the grocery store in the little automobiles, while the paper children were seen in the school or in the drug-store, seated at miniature tables, enjoying dishes of pink ice cream.

Out of this play with the community, a real love for dramatization arose. Stimulated by the excursion to the fire department, by building and furnishing a miniature one, during a free period in the gymnasium some of the children spontaneously began to play "fireman." Later, opportunity was given to the whole group to see this play, and through comment and discussion a well-organized game was developed. This game necessitated the galloping horses that brought the chief to the scene of the fire (the scaling ladder in the gymnasium). The chief was followed by other firemen who carried the hose (a piece of rope) and the life-net (made by the children out of burlap). One of the firemen scaled the ladder and

"saved" the rag dolls at the command of the chief, while the other firemen held the net and manipulated the hose. It should be noted that in the trip to the fire department the children had been greatly impressed by the demonstration of the use of the life-net. This dramatization was very simple, but by the addition of a few "properties," such as their own raincoats, hats, megaphone (which they made), dolls, and the wagon, it assumed great importance in the eyes of the children.

Another bit of dramatization growing out of the play with the community was "The Three Bears." The children had worked out this story in their little theater, and their next desire was to enact the story themselves. This they were permitted to do to their great delight.

An assembly program.—A fitting climax to the series of experiences described was afforded by the preparation and presentation of an assembly program late in March. Earlier in the year, the children had been present at an exercise, given by the first grade, called "A Farm Assembly." When the time arrived to plan for the kindergarten program, they immediately suggested "A City Assembly." An exercise which embodied many phases of the little community was finally developed. The children suggested what should be said and done by the different members, and all were encouraged to contribute. The kindergarten band opened the program. Following this, one child rose and said, "We shall give an assembly on our city." Another child then read the charts which had been composed, printed, and used for reading lessons by the oldest group. These were:

OUR CITY

We shall have a business street.
We shall have a residence street.
We shall have a theater.
We shall have a fire department.

THINGS FOR THE STREET

People
Stores
Street cars
Street lights
Street signs

THINGS WE ARE GOING TO MAKE

We are going to make some buildings for our business street.
We are going to make some buildings for our residence street.

THINGS WE MADE

We made some houses and a church.
We made some stores.
Alan made a street car.
David made some mail boxes.

After the charts had been read, each of several children in turn showed and explained some article he had made for the project. Each child had been permitted to choose the article he wished to show and to decide what he would say about it. Holding this in his hand, he stepped to the front and made his contribution. Examples are:

First child: "I made a street car for our city."

Second child: "I made a mail box for our city."

Third child: "This is a milk wagon for our streets."

Fourth child: "I made a sign for our city: 'Careful—Public School—Slow Down.'"

Fifth child: "These are street lights. The white one means 'safety'; the red one is a danger signal and stands on the street corner."

Following this exercise, another child announced, "We have a fire department for our city."

While those children who had been chosen to give the dramatization of the fire department were making their preparations, the remainder of the group sang Nevin's "Fire Engine." The dramatization which followed was that described above and was the culmination of the assembly on "Our City."